

Lessons From the Practice

Thoughts From a Third-Year Medical Student

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MS III—Psychiatry

Sitting here overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. I can only sit and watch and listen as Sandy becomes more and more disorganized and crosses the dark threshold to enter a world of schizophrenia. "Save me, save me," she calls out periodically. But the dark voice that has come to torment her has control and laughs at our concern and good intentions.

MS III—Obstetrics

The sheer terror of the moment
is almost unbearable.
Everyone in the room
must be privy to my roaring tachycardia.
The woman screams with each contraction.
Any moment I will experience crushing, substernal pain—
any moment.
Can we please turn up the heat? It's only 40 degrees C in this
labor suite.
Squatting between her legs, I have assumed the catcher's
position.
Another contraction—
Another terrifying scream—
My systole now 300—I'm going to die.
How fortunate for me that the woman's own mother keeps
shoving a video camera in my face—"to save this miracle
moment."

MS III—Pediatrics

Oh, new, beautiful babe
Allow me to hold you minutes more
To dissolve away the day
How wonderfully whole you are
Let me rock us both to sleep
And together we shall celebrate and keep
Our covenant with life.

MS III—General Surgery

"What are these?"
(Silence)
"C'mon Jimbo, identify these."
(Silence with tachycardia)
"Goddamit, you do have a teflon brain! We talked about these
last week!"
(Silence with tachycardia and profuse sweating)
"I'm going to get you a goddamn tuition refund—they
haven't taught you a goddamn thing!"

MS III—Personal

Four coffees
to mix with a path book and long night
and dim light of a diner.
Bittersweet memories from a time past—
elevator music takes me back.
Strange that change often
hinges on chance;
yet here I sit with book in hand
two thousand miles away
and the coffee tastes the same.
Four coffees
and another night away.

MS III—General Surgery

No different,
like most meals:
busy residents, busy chatter, eager-to-please students;
gripping, raunchy jokes, irreverent statements,
cross-coverage shop talk:
"What a train wreck!"
"Ingenious turf!"
"My service down by one—Stevens never made it out of the
Unit."
My stomach leaps
and the echo explodes in my ears:
"Stevens never made it. . . ."
My heart races up to room 450,
and Daniel Stevens wears the same disoriented and confused
face
we've all come to imitate during his two-week stay.
Simple embolectomy,
fantastic neuromuscular recovery,
and grateful is the Stevens.
And then fluid retention
and failing mentation—
"Dr Keller, what is wrong with me?"
Assurances, encouragement, confidence.
Post-op day 12, mentation gone.
Turfed to medicine,
and then to the MICU,
and then beyond.
A confused and silly face
stares at me from an empty hospital bed
as the echo explodes in my ears:
"Stevens never made it. . . ."

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MS III—General Medicine

This AM when I sat him up to take his blood pressure
 I did not know
 he would not last the day
 his look of fear, though,
 impressed upon me
 the seriousness of his illness
 did he know?
 Can't get my hands clean
 seems the stain of death is slow to wash
 can't remember the last time I slept
 a face I cannot forget
 perhaps will meet me in a dream.

MS III—General Medicine

A seemingly ancient woman before me
 I cannot speak her language—
 nor she mine
 yet she insists on telling her story
 a translator will arrive soon
 to save me
 voice strong but sad
 no teeth in sight
 blank stares illuminate her blindness
 she speaks deliberately, proudly
 in a manner that commands respect
 I try to interpret a life's story
 revealed by deep, furrowed lines
 of her face

such great things I could learn from her
 simple cotton clothing from a different place and time
 cover a gangrenous right foot
 no left foot in sight
 it is a second smell that concerns me—
 a cancer smell
 the smell of death
 translator arrives—
 an RN who has little time for medical students
 but a lot of time for patients
 I stand awkwardly, ignorant, worried
 as the old woman and the young woman talk, touch, embrace
 and now cry
 "She has traveled 200 miles to ask you for medicine
 to help her meet her death."

Critic's Choice

PSYCHIATRY: "Mr Keller, have you no soulful experience?"

OB/GYN: "Mr Keller, your behavior betrays your hatred of women."

PEDIATRICS: "Mr Keller, do you find it necessary to man-handle all of your patients like this?"

SURGERY: "Keller, you have a teflon brain—nothing sticks."

MEDICINE (sarcastically): "Thank you for that most riveting presentation on hirsutism."

RESIDENCY CHOICE: Pathology